
UTOPIAS OF TOTALITARIANISM: A TEXT OF HOPE AND DESPAIR

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THE ALGEBRA OF HAPPINESS: YEVGENY ZAMYATIN'S *WE*

To Darko Suvin, friend and fellow dystopian

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.
J. Keats. Endymion

Beauty is truth and truth is beauty –
this is all ye know on earth, and all ye need
to know.

J. Keats. Ode to a Grecian Urn

Ah! tempo più non v'è!
L. Da Ponte – W. A. Mozart. Don Giovanni

Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel *We* is one of the most important "Utopian-Dystopian" novels of the first half of the 20th century and was originally considered a criticism of the Communism established in Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution, during the so-called War Communism, with the loss of revolutionary thrust and new stifling social rules. As a result, critics have seen *We* as a dystopian novel, in part inspired by Dostoevsky's *Poem of the Great Inquisitor*.

Dostoevsky's opposition between freedom and happiness is in fact deeply reflected in the mirror of Zamyatin's *We* as the happiness of the Only State, which is really what people experiment in passively obeying the often unwritten laws issued by the Great Benefactor, is opposed to the burden of choice: the same freedom which the Great Inquisitor saves mankind from with the strict allegiance to the Church laws that, while betraying the message of the Gospel, frees mankind from sin, transferring it to the Church itself.

However, it is possible to find a different interpretation of the opposition happiness/freedom that hinges on the idea of beauty weaved into the fabric of Zamyatin's novel. In Zamyatin's novel, beauty takes on a redeeming role which, although totally unfree – like the dance the Author writes about at the beginning of the novel – is not subject to any kind of external constraints. This interpretation makes *We* no longer a dystopia, but a utopia of time, following the pattern about which Zamyatin had written in his essay *Skythians?* The model

of a Scythian who rides along the steppe, who does not know where he comes from, nor where he is going to and whose happiness lies in the journey, in his horse, and in the endless steppe.

The idea of beauty as an endless ride therefore transforms a dystopia into a different model in which Utopia is “here and now” forever: a Utopia of time.

Keywords: Utopia; Dystopia; Zamyatin; Beauty and Happiness.

В статье с парадоксальным названием «Алгебра счастья: “Мы” Евгения Замятина» автор – известный итальянский славист – обращается к наиболее значительному тексту писателя. Роман Евгения Замятина «Мы», один из важнейших романов первой половины XX в., написанный в жанре антиутопии/утопии, первоначально трактовался как критика коммунизма, установившегося в России после Октябрьской революции во времена так называемого военного коммунизма, связанного с потерей революционного подъема и новым удушающим общественным порядком. Вследствие этого критики рассматривают «Мы» как роман-антиутопию, отчасти вдохновленный притчей Достоевского «Великий инквизитор». Противопоставление свободы счастью у Достоевского перекликается с представлением о счастье в Едином Государстве в произведении Замятина, с тем, что люди испытывают, безучастно повинаясь неписаным законам, принятым Благодетелем. Этому чувству противопоставлено бремя выбора – та же свобода, от которой Великий Инквизитор спасает человечество при помощи полного подчинения законам церкви, «исправившей» суть Евангелия и освободившей человечество от греха, взяв его на себя.

Однако можно найти и другое толкование оппозиции счастье/свобода, которое основывается на идее красоты, вплетенной в полотно замятинского повествования. В романе Замятина красота играет роль искупительной жертвы, и, хотя она совершенно лишена свободы, она подобна танцу, который автор описывает в начале романа, и не скована никакими внешними условностями. В рамках этой трактовки «Мы» уже не антиутопия, но утопия времени, и выражает идеи, подобные тем, что звучат в статье Замятина «Скифы ли?». Образ скифа, скачущего верхом по степи, не знающего, откуда он и куда направляется, счастье которого – в самой вечной скачке, в коне, в бескрайней степи, становится для писателя знаковым.

Представление о красоте как о бесконечном пути, таким образом, преобразует антиутопию в другой жанр, в котором утопия всегда трактуется «здесь и сейчас», то есть как утопия времени.

Ключевые слова: утопия; антиутопия; Замятин; красота и счастье.

In the first of his Norton Lectures (Eco), Umberto Eco painstakingly reconstructs the topographical details given by Alexandre Dumas in *The Three Musketeers* about the routes D'Artagnan, Athos, Porthos and Aramis took from the house of Monsieur de Tréville to their homes, and from one home to the other, concluding that in 17th-century Paris no road existed leading to the house of the most enigmatic of the four Musketeers, Aramis.

The Musketeer, who shall reappear at the end of *The Viscount of Bragelonne* as the Duke of Alameda and the General of the Jesuits, has a home no road leads to. Despite Dumas' richness of details, his Paris does not coincide completely with the one in which, if they had existed, his Musketeers would have strolled, and it has somewhat more mystery than the real one.

This applies more or less to most of the cities and to the places where literary works are set. The diaphanous glow of Dostoevsky's *White Nights* is a little more diaphanous than the one which the Petersburgers of his time would have observed walking along the embankment of the Fontanka. The same happens to the garrison where Pyotr Andreyevich Grinëv falls in love with *The Captain's Daughter* and to the Caucasian village where Tolstoy set his short novel *The Cossacks*.

Each of the topographic or geographical anomalies, generally, is not haphazard, but stresses a point in the narrative structure of the work: the mystery of the house of Aramis and its elusive ambiguity; the almost unnatural clarity of the white nights which shows the subtext of the tale and later the tragedy of the love between the "dreamer" and Nastenka; the "naturalness" of life in the Cossack village, which reveals the illusions of the young Tolstoy. The subtle mismatch between the real and the imaginary places has therefore a precise narrative value and it is an element that must be kept in mind in the literary analysis.

Sometimes the separation between real and narrative places is more definite and the distance between them is wider. Sometimes, in fact, the real place does not exist at all except as a term of an implicit comparison. This is the case of the many non-places that populate the literary genre stemmed from Thomas More's *Utopia*¹.

The distance is more evident and at the same time more deceptive for the non-places which populate the genre, opposite and mysteriously similar, of dystopia. From a certain point of view, it might seem that a dystopia is nothing but a utopia turned upside down. In it, the perfection of the happy island seems to take the shape of a lethal immobility and of a prison built by a coercive and ruthless power. Instead, it is a much more complex narrative paradigm.

The difficulties in classifying dystopias within the canonical utopian sub-genres have given rise to many and often contradictory studies. After many years during which critics went on coining and abandoning different names and definitions, we are now approaching a common language [Suvin, 2010; Dark horizons; Maniscalco Basile, Suvin; Jameson]: dystopia could be seen as a subset of the utopian genre to which all the examples of narratives which build a "radically less perfect" world (*kakotopia*) belong and to which in turn two distinct sub-subsets of narratives belong [Suvin, 2010, pp. 381–382]. The first one includes examples of worlds which of worlds that claim to be a utopia, but instead they are a horror (anti-utopias); the second one

¹ In More's novel, in fact – as in many other instances of the genre – the reader knows quite well which real place the Utopian writer utopian intends to allude to: it is quite clear, in fact, the place where "sheep eat men", which Hythloday, T. More's navigator, speaks about: the England of the enclosures period.

includes the examples of worlds which are "radically less perfect" *tout court* (dystopias in the strict sense)².

In these studies, one element remains relatively in the shade: the idea that, as Utopia is another place, and Science Fiction speaks (also) of another time, dystopia is a continuum in which all four dimensions of space-time have an internal consistency and which has a disturbing connection with the writer and the reader's present "space-time."

The time of utopia, in particular, in the systematization made by Dar-ko Suvin of the dimensions of utopia (Locus, Horizon and Orientation³), is significant only when Locus and Horizon (the Utopian structure and its goals) coincide, as in the static, "closed," and 'dogmatic' utopia [Suvin, 2010, p. 18] like, for instance, *The City of Sun* by Tommaso Campanella.

In 'classical' dystopias instead – such as *1984* by G. Orwell or *We* by Ye. Zamyatin – the time takes the stead of the place, or rather the non-time (*u-cronos* or *pan-cronos*) takes the stead of the non-place (*u-topos*).

In fact, in the structure of the dystopian novels of the first half of the 20th century as well as in some American Science-Fiction novels of the second half of the 20th century, there is no trip to Utopia [Baccolini et al.]. The place where the action of the novel is carried out is indeterminate or total: it is not an island, but a continent, or the whole Earth. Therefore, the *topos* is not significant, nor is the historical time. The dystopian story is not necessarily set in the future: in the majority of cases it is so only for narrative needs and its setting in the future more often than not is a mere literary tool.

In fact, dystopia does not describe an elsewhere and an else-when, but a "here and now." As a result, in contrast to what has often been said, dystopia is not the opposite of a utopia of space, but of distortion of a utopia of time: rather it takes the shape a perverse variant of the Millenarian's New Advent.⁴

When it has a role in utopian narration, time is typically seen as a different kind of "place," far or near, which is *other* with respect to the author's and the reader's present. As the unreachable and happy island of Utopia is but a narrative instrument used to describe a "radically better world," the utopian time assumes an analogous connotation.

In 20th-century dystopia instead, time is not an 'accident' of the story, but an integral part of the fabric of its philosophical background and also the main key to its interpretation.

² Just after its publication, *We* was seen by most critics as a tragic parody of the Soviet State [Voronsky, p. 43; Mikhailov, p. 52]. On the possible influence of Jerome K. Jerome (*The New Utopia*) on *We*, see: [Sternbock-Fermor, p. 173]. Jerome's novel has been known in Russia since 1912. About the possible derivation of some of the narrative elements of *We* from *Krasnaya Zvezda* by A. A. Bogdanov, see: [Lewis, Weber, p. 186].

³ In Suvin's classification, the Locus is the panorama of space and time in which the narrative action takes place, the Horizon is the fate which the action of protagonists of the story draws them to, and Orientation is the direction of their actions [Suvin, 2010, p. 18; Suvin, 2004; Gregg].

⁴ The difficulty to classify dystopias within the 'canonical' subgenres of utopia [Mannheim] has given rise to a rich debate and to many studies [Dark horizons; Maniscalco Basile, Suvin; Jameson; more recently, cf. Suvin, 2010]. The debate has been particularly rich and interesting about the two more important twentieth-century dystopias that have established the model of the genre, Ye. Zamyatin's *We* and G. Orwell's *1984*.

Zamyatin's novel, in particular, reflects this feature in a deep and ambiguous way, and the way in which new and old motives mingle makes it quite likely that it is the mine which a good deal of twentieth-century dystopias have drawn materials and ideas from.

In the critical tradition, *We* was seen above all as a fruit of the tree of the *Poem of the Great Inquisitor* about which Ivan Karamazov speaks to his brother Alyosha in a tavern after having expounded the reasons that exclude the existence of an infinitely good God and of His "providential" plan [Dostoevsky; De Michelis].

According to the Great Inquisitor, who arrests Jesus Christ returned on Earth in order to reaffirm the principles of His preaching distorted by His Church, mankind is not able to bear the burden of freedom. The uncertainty of free choice deprives him of the happiness that can only be obtained by means of his "deliverance" from the need to choose. For this reason the Church had taken mankind's sins upon itself, freeing it from the need to follow a conscience which would but haunt it. Thus, obeying an iron law and in an totally unfree environment, mankind could find even on Earth the happiness that should be experimented only in Heaven.

In Zamyatin's novel the Benefactor is the guarantor of this pathway.

But this is only the beginning. If the dilemma between happiness and freedom, distorted and turned into a gruesome destiny, was at the base of Orwell's *1984*, in Zamyatin's *We* it is only a part of the conceptual structure of the narration. Another idea, in fact, flows through *We*, woven into the frame of the story, in a weft and in a warp far removed from those of Dostoyevsky's *Great Inquisitor*: the idea that in a "totalitarian" state beauty is more revolutionary than freedom⁵.

Happiness and Freedom

1984

That beauty is subversive is an idea definitely present in Orwell's novel, in which, however, it is rather kept in the background; actually, in *1984* the dilemma happiness/freedom is the main point⁶.

Sex is the origin of Winston Smith's "conversion" and is central to the entire structure of the narrative. The act by which Julia rips off her clothes and throws them away is "the same magnificent gesture by which a whole civilization seemed to be annihilated..." [Orwell, p. 131].

In the context of the novel, "love" between Winston and Julia is a political rather than a 'sexual' act. Julia has sex in a secluded but public place, where one can, but must not, be seen, under penalty of the inexorable punishment

⁵ *We* was translated into English in 1924 and the motives of Zamyatin's novel, although incomplete and simplified, can be found also in *1984*. Orwell had certainly read it and he had written a critical article published as a foreword in a French translation of the novel (1946). See also the interview to Kurt Vonnegut [Vonnegut].

⁶ The quotations from *1984* are from [Orwell]; those from *We* are from [Замятин, 2003–2004]. The translations from Russian are mine. For a more recent edition of the novel, see: [Замятин, 2011].

inflicted on illegitimate lovers by the IngSoc (English Socialism). In the sexual relationship between Winston and Julia there is no passion, but only rebellion. In Julia's description, sex is satisfied desire, after which every other energy, for the Party, for Big Brother, for the Two Minutes Hate, is spent.

When you make love you're using up energy; and afterwards you feel happy and don't give a damn for anything. They can't bear you to feel like that. They want you to be bursting with energy all the time. All this marching up and down and cheering and waving flags is simply sex gone sour. If you're happy inside yourself, why should you get excited about Big Brother and the Three-Year Plans and the Two Minutes Hate and all the rest of their bloody rot?

[Orwell, p. 139].

The "time" of the rebellion, therefore, is but a moment, and not even a moment of exclusive possession. Julia confesses to Winston she has had sex many times, and therefore she has had many more "moments" with other men and even with members of the Internal Party. So, the cry "Do it to her!" by Winston Smith while surrendering to his inquisitor, O'Brien, can hardly be considered as a betrayal, but is instead a spontaneous and uncontrollable impulse: no moment of no-Doublethink⁷ can compensate for the terror of Room 101, the place where the worst fears of a "thought-criminal", in the case of Winston Smith a cage full of hungry rats ready to devour his eyes and tongue, become real.

In George Orwell's novel, during the interrogation which leads Winston Smith to the abjuration of his "love" for Julia, the happiness promised by IngSoc shows its vicious nature while O'Brien explains to his "revolutionary" victim who is more equal to whom.

O'Brien's speech, which concludes the revolutionary parabola of Winston Smith, has as its center a "value" that includes in itself both freedom and happiness: power. The power of the jailer over the recluse, of the absolute ruler, the Party, over its powerless subjects. The power of those who aspire to empty the spirit of all of them:

We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves.

[Ibid, p. 279].

and to fill it with that of the few who will hold the heel of their boots on the face of the many.

Power is not a means, it is an end, O'Brien says.

⁷ In Orwell's novel, Doublethink is the logical trick that turns an unpleasant reality into its opposite: the Ministry of the Repression of Dissent becomes the Ministry of Love, the Ministry of War is transformed into the Ministry of Peace, the Ministry of Propaganda into the Ministry of Truth, etc.

One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power.

<...>

How does one man assert his power over another, Winston? <...> By making him suffer. Obedience is not enough. Unless he is suffering, how can you be sure that he is obeying your will and not his own? Power is in inflicting pain and humiliation.

<...>

If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – forever.¹⁸

[Orwell, p. 280].

Orwell's "paradox" of power is certainly the central theme of *1984*: he who has power, in fact, can be assured that obedience is a consequence of its exercise only if the commands he issues causes the most undesirable consequences to whoever must obey, or better – as O'Brien points out – the most horrendous ones.

In a distorted and terrible way, then, happiness does exist in the world of Big Brother, but it is reserved strictly for him and for his acolytes, who share the joy of torture and of oppression of everyone else. And their triumph is not complete until – and this occurs at the very end – Winston Smith and his lover betray their ideals and their love, and until Smith comes to sincerely believe that $2 + 2 = 5$.⁸

We

In Zamyatin's novel the opposition happiness/freedom has some much more articulate and complex levels of stratification based on an unusual use of the Second Principle of Thermodynamics.

Here! There are two forces in the world, entropy and energy. The first one leads to a calm peace and to a happy balance. The second one to the destruction of balance and an endless tormenting movement. Your ancestors, or rather ours, the Christians, bowed first to entropy, to a God.

[Ibid, p. 328].

A few years before writing *We*, in an article of 1918, *Skify li?*, Zamyatin pointed out in a few sentences the center of gravity of his political thought: the ride of the Scythian.

По зеленой степи одиноко мчится дикий всадник с веющими волосами – скиф. Куда мчится? Никуда. Зачем? Низачем. Просто потому мчит-

⁸ This unusual mathematical operation is inspired by F. Dostoevsky, *Zapiski iz Podpolya* [Dostoevsky; Shane; Maniscalco Basile, 2004b].

ся, что он скиф, потому, что он сросся с конем, потому, что он кентавр, и дорожке всего ему воля, одиночество, конь, широкая степь.

[Замятин, 2010, с. 285].

(In the green steppe a wild knight rides with his hair in the wind, he is a Scythian. Where does he go? Nowhere. To what end? None. He simply rides, because he is a Scythian, because he is at one with his horse, because he is a centaur and he loves freedom, solitude, the horse and the wide steppe).

Almost at the end of *We*, however, an irreconcilable contradiction appears: a terrible truth revealed to D-503 by a chance neighbor in a public bathhouse.

...Бесконечности нет. Если мир бесконечен, то средняя плотность материи в нем должна быть равна нулю. А так как она не нуль – это мы знаем, – то, следовательно, Вселенная – конечна...

[Замятин, 2003, с. 366].

(...There is no infinite. If the world were infinite then the average density of matter should be equal to zero. But since it is not zero – that we know – then, as a result, the universe is finite...)⁹

And an excruciating question:

Слушайте, – дергал я соседа. – Да слушайте же, говорю вам! Вы должны – вы должны мне ответить: а там, где кончается ваша конечная Вселенная? Что там – дальше?

[Там же].

(Listen – I took the neighbor by his collar – listen to me, I say! You must, you must answer; there, where your finite universe ends. What lies beyond?)

But if the universe is finite, what about the space of the steppe in which the Scythian rides, what about the green ocean where his ride can last forever? A run and an excruciating circular motion without an end in a finite world? Or beyond the Columns of Hercules?

I-330¹⁰, the woman who tries to involve the protagonist of the novel in the attempt to steal the Integral in order to escape from the Only State objects to D-503, who asserts that the Only State is the result of the Last Revolution and that, as there is no last number, no Last Revolution is conceivable.¹¹

⁹ Density (ρ) equals mass (m) divided by volume (V): i. e. $\rho = m/V$; if volume is infinite ($V = \infty$) then density equals 0: ($\rho = m/V = 0$). On the mathematical contribution to the construction of *We*: [Brett Cooke; White].

¹⁰ In the novel masculine names begin with a consonant followed by a number, while feminine ones begin with a vowel also followed by a number.

¹¹ «Революция социальная – только одно из бесчисленных чисел» [Замятин, 2004, т. 3., с. 173] (“Social revolution is only one of the infinite number of numbers”).

But in a finite universe a Last Revolution must exist.

The parabola of the protagonist's feelings spans from the enthusiasm for the upcoming launch of the Integral, the spatial ship that should bring the power of the Only State and of the Benefactor to the whole universe, in order to:

...Предстоит благодетельному игу разума подчинить неведомые существа, обитающие на иных планетах – быть может, еще в диком состоянии свободы. Если они не поймут, что мы несем им математически безошибочное счастье, наш долг – заставить их быть счастливыми.

[Замятин, 2003, с. 211]

("Force into the yoke of reason other unknown beings that inhabit other planets-perhaps still in a wild state of freedom"), to the confusion that takes possession of D-503 after his first meeting with I-330 behind closed curtains,¹² to final despair and resignation, which ends with the Great Operation that produces the removal of the protagonist's fantasy.

More levels, therefore, are intertwined in the structure of the novel.

The first level of analysis leads to seeing *We* as a criticism of the Soviet State (i.e., no longer a Bolshevik and revolutionary State, but crystallized in a Church as a result of the Proletarian [Last] Revolution), in which happiness is mandatory but crushes the individual under its heel. From this perspective, *We* is a pure anti-utopia.¹³

Happiness and Beauty

However, there is a second level of analysis which explores a different aspect of the history that ill combines with dystopia: beauty, which in 1984 is an element to stamp out forever along with freedom.

There will be no distinction between beauty and ugliness. There will be no curiosity, no enjoyment of the process of life.

[Orwell, p. 280].

The key to the "mystery" of *We* is in the first pages of the novel.

¹² In the Only State, sexual activities are allowed, but they require a previous reservation and the exhibition to the guardian on duty of the pink ticket that authorizes the "numbers" to lower the curtains of their glass homes, which are otherwise always open.

¹³ "*Anti-utopia* is a significantly different locus which is explicitly designed to refute a currently proposed *eutopia*. It is a pretended *eutopia* – a community whose hegemonic principles pretend to its being more perfectly organized than any thinkable alternative, while our representative "camera eye" and value-monger finds out it is significantly less perfect, a polemic nightmare. Thus, it finally also turns out to be a dystopia. "*Simple*" *Dystopia* (so called to avoid inventing yet another prefix to "topia") is a straightforward dystopia, that is, one which is not also an anti-utopia" [Suvin, 2010, p. 385; Maniscalco Basile, Suvin, p. 15; Suvin, 1977; Suvin, 1979; Dark horizons].

И дальше – сам с собою: почему красиво? Почему танец – красив? Ответ: потому что это несвободное движение, потому что весь глубокий смысл танца именно в абсолютной эстетической подчиненности, идеальной несвободе.

[Замятин, 2003, с. 213].

(Then, between me and me, a question: Why beautiful? Why is dance beautiful? Reply: because it is an unfree movement, because the deep meaning of dance is its aesthetic, absolute subordination to an ideal unfreedom...)

In this passage, Zamyatin adds a third parameter to the dichotomy freedom/happiness.

The reason why the idea of beauty makes its entrance into the canvas woven by Dostoevsky in the *Poem of the Great Inquisitor* is because – but Zamyatin does not openly say this – beauty and happiness are two faces of the same coin: i. e., they complete (and explain) one another.

The word “happiness” appears for the first time in the proclamation, published in the State Newspaper in the first page of the novel [Замятин, 2003, с. 211], in which it extolls the construction of the Integral, the space ship that shall reach distant worlds and will ensure that the unknown beings of other planets are happy about the same infallible mathematical happiness that the Only State imposes on the entire globe.

And, as is evident, that depends directly on the power of the Only State. The happiness Zamyatin writes about seems then directly related to the one described in Dostoevsky’s *Poem of the Great Inquisitor*: a happiness that stems from the ‘beneficial’ inability of mankind to choose the course of its own actions, and from the fact that someone else chooses its destiny on its behalf: in this case, the Benefactor.

The idea of beauty is introduced immediately afterwards, it is closely linked to, the idea of freedom (or to that of its absence) and is introduced in a context far removed from the proclamation of the Only State: in dance, i.e. in the most strictly “bound” of all the activities of man. In “beautiful” dance everything happens with a wonderful absence of freedom, like the movement of the gears of the machines that build the Integral and move in perfect coordination with the sound of inaudible music.

...[Если] наши предки отдавались танцу в самые вдохновенные моменты своей жизни... то это значит только одно: инстинкт несвободы издревле органически присущ человеку...

[Замятин, 2003, с. 213].

(...Our ancestors abandoned themselves to dance in the most inspired moments of their lives... this may mean only one thing: that the instinct of unfreedom has been inherent in man since the most remote times.)

But if beauty is not free, what sets it apart from the infallible mathematical happiness of the Only State? The word *krasivy* (beautiful) appears only four times in the novel: twice related to dance, once to the sharp, white teeth of I-330, the woman who seduces D-503 towards the new Revolution; once again to her large, dark eyes, when the woman is placed under the Pneumatic Bell in order to be tortured.

Эта женщина упорно молчала и улыбалась. Я заметил, что у ней острые и очень белые зубы, и что это красиво.

Затем ее ввели под Колокол. У нее стало очень белое лицо, а так как глаза у нее темные и большие, то это было очень красиво.

[Замятин, 2003, с. 367].

(That woman was stubbornly silent and smiling. I noticed that she had sharp, white teeth, and that this was beautiful. Then they led her under the Bell. Her face was very white, and since she had large, dark eyes that also was very beautiful.)

The word "beauty" (*krasota*) appears most often, but always referring to the mathematics that D-503 sees as the underlying order of the Only State, in the mathematical ballet of machines; in the square; in the integers, numbers that have an "exact beauty;" in music. If in 1984 beauty is one of the elements of "humanity" that Big Brother will stamp out under IngSoc's boots, in *We* it weaves an underground canvas of hope, buried inside a benevolent tyranny and a failed rebellion.

Beauty

The idea of beauty appears at the beginning and at the end of *We* and it gives a frame to D-503's delirium, which shifts from the enthusiasm for the Only State and its achievements to confusion and resignation. But this is a case in which the frame shapes the painting as a whole. At the center, a mathematical formula gives the sign of the permutation between beauty and happiness that Zamyatin poses at the base of his "dystopia."

Но не ясно ли: блаженство и зависть – это числитель и знаменатель дроби, именуемой счастьем.

[Замятин 2003, с. 225].

(Is it not clear? Bliss and envy are the numerator and the denominator of the fraction that is called happiness.)

After this statement, D-503 points out the human sufferings that led to the emergence of the Only State, and then to its conquests: the removal of hunger and the elimination of love with the Lex Sexualis, on the basis

of which: «всякий из нумеров имеет право – как на сексуальный продукт – на любой нумер» [Замятин, 2003, с. 225]. (“Each number has a right towards every other number as a sex object”).

The conclusion is obvious.

Ясно: поводов для зависти – нет уже никаких, знаменатель дроби счастья приведен к нулю – дробь превращается в великолепную бесконечность.

[Замятин, 2003, с. 225].

(It is clear: now there are no more reasons for envy – made equal to zero the denominator of the fraction of happiness, the fraction takes the value of a beautiful infinity.)¹⁴

Having amputated the most elementary vital stimuli of mankind, hunger and the impulse to reproduce, and eliminated with them the competition for food and sex, “there are no more reasons for envy” and happiness is infinite.

Infinity

We know that Zamyatin feared the hypertrophy of the State and it would be easy to look at *We* as a prophecy of the ever growing presence of the State in the life of individuals¹⁵. And for sure there is no shortage of elements in the novel that justify this interpretation, but a closer look at them shows that there are other tracks leading the reader deeper and deeper into the fabric of the novel.

The *Lex Sexualis* and its relationship with the vicissitudes of the protagonists of the novel show a deep imbalance. The love quadrangle that involves D-503, O-90 (the woman who loves D-503), R-13 and I-330 generates between its vertices strong tensions, incompatible with the sexual pacification that the law had imposed. O-90 desires the exclusive possession of D-503 to the point of wishing to generate a son with him (against the rules of the Only State); D-503, instead, while he has no difficulty in sharing her with R-13, in turn desires the exclusive possession of I-330. At the

¹⁴ As it is known, the value of a fraction is the larger, the smaller is its denominator. So, if the equation of happiness can be expressed as $\text{happiness} = \frac{\text{bliss}}{\text{envy}}$, it is evident that the smaller is envy, the greater is happiness; and if envy were equal 0, the equation would be: $\text{happiness} = \frac{\text{bliss}}{\text{envy}(0)} = \infty$.

It is the inverse equation of that which demonstrates the finiteness of the universe: in that, the division by ∞ ($\rho = \frac{m}{V} = \frac{m}{\infty} \rightarrow m = 0$) shows the absurdity of the conception of an infinite universe. In this, the division by 0 leads to the certainty of the absolute happiness of the Only State.

¹⁵ Cf. the interview to f. L'efevre in “Les Nouvelles Litteraires” in 1926, n. 497.

center of the quadrangle, then, where the two diagonals cross, live jealousy and envy: in a word, passion.

Then, in the system of total equality that reigns in the Only State, some are more equal than others, from the sinister and serpentine S-4711, a controller who appears in different clothes and occasions and has apparently "power" over D-503 to the Benefactor, who is duly re-elected on every Day of the Unanimity. If hunger no longer exists as the Only State distributes everybody with the food needed to survive, power is not shared but is firmly in the hands of an invisible élite.

As in the *Poem of the Great Inquisitor*, someone must ensure everybody else's happiness and has the power to impose it, by means of Inquisition stakes or Pneumatic Bells. Then, the happiness of the Only State is based on a falsehood (ideological in the mannheimian sense of the word). From this point of view, *We* would not be an anti-utopia, but a true dystopia.

A passage of *We*, however, provides a different image of Zamyatin's construction: precisely the passage about dance.

It is certainly not by chance that beauty was banned from many of the other dystopian novels after *We*. Beauty, in fact, cannot be possessed, does not exclude anyone and does not distinguish between its users: no one, for example, in a concert hall in which one of Beethoven's Symphonies is performed enjoys less its beauty because other people are enjoying it too. If anything, just the opposite. When we admire a painting or we read a poem, our pleasure (or better, the happiness generated by their beauty) does not hinder nor restricts the pleasure of anyone else: beauty is a good of which it is not possible to be envious, because when beauty reveals itself, it does not do so just for one person but for all those who, at that time, are its spectators and, as John Keats writes, it lasts forever.

Beauty then is the answer to D-503's frenzied question: "What is there beyond?"

In the ride of the Scythian there is all and nothing beyond. The wild knight does not want anything other than his ride along the steppe, without origin and without any destination: his ride is "infinite," and he lives it one moment at a time. Zamyatin's dance, therefore, expresses fully the qualities of the ride of the Scythian. His ride reflects a total, although unfree, order, but not an order imposed by a Benefactor or by a Big Brother: it is made by the nature of movement itself, and in order to generate happiness it must have in itself the reasons of its existence, as the sound of hooves of the Scythian's horse galloping through the infinite steppe has.

But in the "beautiful" dance another and deeper level of meaning is hidden.

Above and inside dance lives the music that guides the gestures of the dancers and it is the most abstract and perhaps the mother of all human activities that 'produce' beauty. Music – and more clearly in the music Zamyatin had known it before the revolution that sprang from Expressionism – is a thread of time, crisscrossed by tensions and distensions, by dissonances and resolutions, by melodic and harmonic

elaborations and by “allusions” to already known musical material, by “cadences” that complete and conclude a musical piece with the return “home:” that is the tonic chord. Music indeed – if one wishes to follow the extreme abstractness of musical analysis by Heinrich Schenker – is but the tonic chord, “prolonged” by passing notes [Schenker; Drabkin].

A musical piece, although it does not describe anything, represents a home from which one moves away following along the thread of time and to which one always returns just before the music is over. Music, therefore, gives its listeners the image of a journey, studded with dangers and obstacles (modulations away from the tonic, dissonances¹⁶), which – like every fairy tale worth listening to – ends up with “And they lived happily ever after.”

Dance fills this journey with gestures and makes it more engaging, adding other senses (sight, touch) to the fairy tale of music. Dance, therefore, involves the body and the mind of man in a ‘dream’ in which every evil is vanquished, every obstacle is safely jumped over and in which eventually home opens its doors to the traveller. In the departure, in the return and above all in the journey (in anticipation of the return) lie the power of music (and of dance) and its beauty.

In the sound of the hooves of the Scythian’s horse and in the music generated by the movement of dance is an order which – moment by moment, i. e., “here and now” – is infinite.

Nevertheless beauty, which appears as an enemy to be defeated in 1984 and in that novel is the rather undefined opposite of “ugliness,” in *We* is more precisely described and identified. Beautiful is dance, beautiful is the mathematics that underlie the construction of the Integral, beautiful is the algebra of the integers, beautiful is the contrast between I-330’s black eyes and black hair and her white skin (as beautiful as the simple relationship between 1 and 0). Ugly is the controller S-4711 creeping in the shadows of the Only State, horrid is $\sqrt{-1}$, a number *contra rationem*; and from these elements we can extrapolate not only the conception of beauty that imbues Zamyatin’s novel, but also its function.

The idea that beauty and truth are somehow connected is quite widespread in the world of twentieth-century natural sciences. Einstein’s theory of general relativity (1916) was accepted by the scientific community because of its beauty, well before Arthur Eddington experimentally proved its correctness in 1919 and, as a further example, the strings theory – not experimentally proved – fascinates many theoretical physicists [Greene, 1999; Greene, 2005; Susskind].

¹⁶ J.-P. Changeux has shown that inside the “tonal” system a dissonance is the neuronal equivalent of a nonsense (for instance: “*pizza is too hot. . . to drink*”) and it renders the perception of the musical composition unclear until it “resolves” itself on a consonant chord [Changeux, p. 52]. Nevertheless, the musical structure of expectations and resolution is present in all or nearly all European tonal and non-European non-tonal musical expressions. From Indian *Raga* to Balinese *Gamelan*, accompanying *wayang* puppet performances, to Chinese and Japanese classical music, to Karlheinz Stockhausen’s *Carr’e*, to Arnold Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron* and to Anton Webern’s *String quartet*, all of them obey to the principle of the creation of a “pattern” of tone, melody and rhythm which is more or less easily recognizable by the listener and that, once enounced, shall reappear sooner or later in the musical fabric, building the structure of expectation/resolution even out of the rules of Western “tonal” system.

In a first approximation, the beauty of a theory resides in its ability to explain complex phenomena in a simple and concise way. The equation of Paul A. M. Dirac, combining quantum physics and relativity

$$i \cdot \delta \psi = m \psi$$

has this quality, and beauty assumes a rigorous methodological function in his work [Dirac]: to show that what is beautiful is also true.

Vincenzo Barone synthesizes this principle in the equation:

$$BEAUTY = unity + necessity + simplicity$$

in which the law of the "explanation" of a phenomenon combines in one expression the multiplicity of its elements, it excludes any other possible explanation and is significantly more "simple" than the description of each of its single component elements [Barone]. For example, the expression 10^{89} is much simpler (and more beautiful) than 10 followed by 89 zeros. In the same way, a theory describing a phenomenon that cannot be described in any other 'reasonable' way has the quality of "necessity".

The beauty of a physical theory, from this point of view, is independent from its 'trialability': experimental proof shall probably follow sooner or later, but meanwhile the beauty-truth assumes, so to speak, an anti-Galilean, or more precisely, a Platonic character.

This is exactly the idea of beauty that inhabits Zamyatin's novel. Except that, instead of applying it to a relatively simple portion of the physical nature of things, destined to be even more simplified, in which the interactions of its components are many but finite in number, Zamyatin lets them meander between the folds of *We* as if the social system he describes were as simple, 'limited' and predictable as a physical system. But every social system – even the smallest – works as a series of mirrors that reflect one another and whose reflections are endless as the feedback produced by the actions of its members is.

However, as beauty points to the 'truth' and also the 'just' [Scarry], in a social system it represents a way of escaping from the non-measurable number of interactions that make it unpredictable and not liable to be simplified [Maniscalco Basile, 2004a], and its flow suggests instead that men inhabiting it are capable of 'prophecies' rather than of forecasts of statistical trends. Because of these elements, the structure of the novel shows completely different features from those of a tragic parody of a totalitarian state and it is far removed from an anti-utopia: it takes the shape, instead, of a utopia of time¹⁷.

The idea of the beauty of the dance Zamyatin speaks about is very similar to that expounded in Plato's in *Hippias Major*, where "beautiful" and

¹⁷ Beauty – paradoxically – could also be the root of a dystopia: see, for example, Jacques Sternberg's *La Sortie au fond de l'Espace* [Sternberg], in which some alien people decide to exterminate all the humans because they are ugly.

(ethical) “good” are not clearly distinguishable. But above all, the simplicity of the dance echoes the perfection of a Platonic form which is devoid of all the complexities that its earthly reflections manifest. To see beauty in the dance, therefore, is equivalent to the turning of the head of the man in the cave and to his finally seeing the form of which up to then he knew only the shadow; and what he sees is not only is the absolute “beauty,” but also – as all Platonic knowledge – the absolute “good” and the absolute “just.”¹⁸

Zamyatin is very conscious of the complexity of the world [Richards, p. 62] and of the entropy that permeates it. The question “What is there beyond?” does manifest not only the fear of the narrowness of the space at whose border the Scythian would be forced to halt his run, but also that of the narrowness of time. Or more precisely, it shows the fear of a future that in a complex world is not predictable¹⁹; while in the world of dance and of beauty all is predictable and its time, moment by moment, lasts forever.

From this point of view, even the endless run of the Scythian acquires a new value. His gallop along the steppe follows a straight line, which is the simplest, yet at the same time the most complex of geometric figures: complex because it is infinite, simple because every moment along its path is just a point, even if it belongs to a sequence of an infinite number of points. That tells us about the freedom of the Scythian, but also of the beauty (= simplicity) of his run.

The Gateway to Beauty

In Zamyatin’s novel a narrow gateway opens onto beauty, onto happiness, which is also freedom, and onto utopia.

An obvious weakness of the apparent centrality of the dilemma happiness/freedom in Zamyatin’s *We* is the deep meaning of his idea of freedom. What for the Only State is “wild,” and a revolutionary ideal for I-330 and her companions, for D-503 is a nightmare.

Any violation of the order, from lagging behind the times established for any official event to each non-participation in the occasions of collective consensus, becomes for D-503 an unforgivable transgression or even the symptom of a disease. The idea of subverting the Only State turns into a kind of delirium that has its center in the desire of the protagonist to “possess” I-330. As that is not possible under the empire of the *Lex Sexualis*, D-503 agrees without enthusiasm to be a revolutionary and only for the

¹⁸ Cf. Plato, *Hippias Major*, 286d, 287c, 289d, 292c, 294th, 297B. Many other passages in Plato associate a form with beauty: *Cratylus* 439c; *Euthydemus* 301a; *Laws* 655c; *Phaedo* 65d, 75d, 100b; *Phaedrus* 254b; *Parmenides* 130b; *Philebus* 15a; *Republic* 476b, 493e, 507b [Plato]. See also [Pappas].

¹⁹ Even if Gödel’s Theorem had not yet undermined David Hilbert’s ‘contradictions free’ mathematical system when *We* was written, Zamyatin was conscious of the irreducibility of modern mathematics to the Pythagorean system of integers upon which the Only State was built. D-503’s horror for numbers like $i = \sqrt{-1}$, which the writer calls “irrationals” in order to keep the simile with *ratio* (in Latin in the novel) – and which is an imaginary number rather than an “irrational” one (and not a “complex number” as Philip Wegner says in [Wegner, p. 157]; a “complex number” in fact has a real part and an imaginary one, like $a + ib$).

shaky prospects of love that the revolution apparently opens up to him.

If in 1984 'transgressive sex' is accepted with joy and as a challenge, and is the beginning of Winston Smith's rebellion as well as its epilogue – the cry "Do it to her!" which establishes his renunciation of love and of revolution – in *We* it is part, natural and denied, of the "Horizon" of utopia.

The pale and pointed beauty of I-330 is an ideal that has in itself an irremediable contradiction: in order to "possess", D-503 must surrender to freedom: but freedom confuses and disturbs him.

The "Horizon" of *We*, therefore, is a world in which happiness is intertwined with a natural unfreedom that nobody imposes on anyone else: a different freedom from the one with which the Great Inquisitor protects mankind: a paradoxical freedom in which there is no "power" if not in the nature of things, in music, in dance and in the harmony of mathematics.

In 1984, this door is blocked because the conception of power fills up all the space of individual and collective freedom.

In Zamyatin's novel dance is limited movement; the beauty of the rhythmical harmony of its movements and the happiness it produces are open to all; it has no leaders and nobody inside it exercises power. Conversely in 1984 harmony and order have rather the appearance of a Virgin of Nuremberg, with its inward protruding nails placed at regular intervals. During the twentieth century, the utopian Horizon is therefore displaced and it tightens around individuals like a vise until, for all of them, $2 + 2 = 5$.

In Zamyatin's novel time takes then the stead of place or, perhaps, a non-time (u-cronos) of a non-place (u-topos).

Utopia, in More's and his fellow travellers' vision, is the future. A wonderful place where man should one day dwell, but the world of dystopia is a world of the present. Not necessarily different, in essence, from the utopian world. In it there is equality (Big Brother and acolytes apart), freedom from want and order: ultimately, happiness in the Dostoyevskian sense of the word; and, just as in the parable of the Great Inquisitor, total immobility in a falsely perfect present.

So, against the Only State that imposes a motionless and false order and an incomplete and illusory happiness, Zamyatin envisages a different utopia of "here and now:" a "here and now" as infinite as the ocean of the steppe. In fact, only within the "here and now" of beauty may the equation of happiness be considered fully verified:

$$happiness = \frac{bliss}{envy(0)} = \infty$$

Dystopia takes then the shape of a utopia of time in which not the perfection of Utopia, but its time and place are reversed; in which Locus and Horizon coincide, and the Orientation vector is equal to zero²⁰.

$$\xrightarrow{\text{Orientation}} = 0$$

²⁰ Cf. D. Suvin, *Locus, Horizon and Orientation: The Concept of Possible World as a Key to Utopian Studies*, in: [Suvin, 2010, p. 111].

But in Zamyatin's novel the two perspectives, the utopian present-future and the dystopian "here and now", are inextricably intertwined.

The immovable Horizon of the Only State, which has its crystallisation in the Great Operation D-503 eventually undergoes and that will deprive him of his imagination and of his creative skills, mixes with the Horizon of beauty, accessible and earthly, which permeates the darkest moments of the novel. The Redeemer-liberator (D-503),²¹ who does not believe in being such, ends up on the cross but, somehow, in the narrative fiction, he shows the way. We, therefore, instead of being the "mother" of all dystopias, appears to be a utopia in which time (here and now) and place (the Only State, all the Earth, the oecumene, whose boundaries are defined by the horizon of the last man who keeps watch from the house at the farthest edge of the inhabited earth) are fused in a continuum that has no borders: a Chiliastic Utopia that revives in the modern world, the revolutionary energy of the Anabaptists of Thomas Müntzer [Mannheim].

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²¹ Many times Evangelic references in Zamyatin's novel have been looked for, and maybe found. From D-503's age (33) to his near-folly (40 days in the desert), to the character of Mary Magdalene (I-330) [Ланин, с 33; Suvin, 2010, p. 327]. Suvin recognizes in *We* a parallel narrative structure to J. Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

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